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book review

Reflections of Being ‘In’ Institutions

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Sara Ahmed

On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life

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As a Māori scholar from New Zealand, who has worked in the area of equity, equal opportunities and diversity in university settings for the last twenty years, I am always struck by the fragility of the equity enterprise. One does not have to encounter overt hostility towards equity objectives for them to flounder: my experience has been that apathy and wilful disregard can be as effective in devaluing something which on paper seems to muster general accord. This is not to say that over the last two decades I have not witnessed significant gains in equity goals that have benefited students and staff or not had ample opportunity to feel pride in what has been achieved. I remain thankful that the joy of being Indigenous has meant that I have been able to share in the successes of others as part of a collective and observe positive, sometimes transformative, change. But I am conscious that in reading Sara Ahmed's *On Being Included* I repeatedly experienced a sense of profound recognition of the issues, challenges, obstacles and frustrations that are

expounded in her work. The 'we' she employs throughout her book sweeps me in and confers, indeed confirms, a sense of solidarity and collectivity of purpose at the same time that it is likely to be perceived as excluding or distancing other readers. This in turn allows a greater reflexivity about the experience of being 'in' institutions and the everyday taken-for-granted parts of our professional lives.

On Being Included examines the way diversity is done within higher education settings in Australia and the United Kingdom. Weaving together interviews with diversity practitioners, reflections and observations drawn from her own experience, elements of institutional ethnography that capture the importance of various texts and policy documents, and theoretical insights, Ahmed creates an account that holds to account institutions that do not bring into effect the diversity policies they themselves produce. Moreover, she notes that the production of diversity policies become the focus of institutional efforts so that these legitimating texts becomes the markers of diversity being done while the problem that they were originally meant to address persists. Ahmed looks at the tensions of working in the diversity/race/equity space and, in particular, the burden of working with *and* against institutional priorities and objectives. Cooption, collaboration and a sense of complicity complicate relationships with communities of interest and the broader institution. Ahmed also exposes the contradiction that individuals who are mandated by the institution to do diversity work find institutional barriers and resistance when they attempt the work that they were appointed to do. This leads to those who are charged with identifying and describing the problem of racism being treated as if *they* are creating the problem (and are the problem) thus putting at risk an institution's reputation for 'being diverse'. The whiteness of institutions is revealed anew by Ahmed who asks whether in creating a (contained) space for people of colour the institution is allowed to remain white.

In her highly personalised introduction Ahmed maps out how she was led to this research space. Important elements of her previous work converge in looking at how the gendered body of colour navigates and negotiates academic institutions. The first two chapters focus on how diversity is operationalised within a white institutional context. Examining the role of diversity practitioners in implementing diversity practices and policies, Ahmed underscores the need for relationship building and the ability to talk to plural audiences. Ahmed notes that the expression

'banging your head against a brick wall' frequently appeared in her participant interviews and she uses the figure of the wall throughout her discussion to underscore institutional resistance and the place that racism and naming racism plays in the university. She then focuses on the language of diversity and the problematic nature of the word itself. Diversity can be presented as a 'happy' narrative because it distances interlocutors from specific commitments to social justice outcomes. For instance, diversity can be achieved in terms such as increasing numbers of people of colour within a university without necessarily addressing equity issues. Diversity is not only easier to attain than equality but it can also be co-opted to maintain the status quo or legitimate particular recruitment policies. Ahmed does note, however, that the language of diversity may present opportunities to begin conversations that would not have taken place within other equity vocabularies. Chapters 3 and 4 take a sustained look at the (non)performativity of diversity documents. As noted previously, the documents become the 'doing' of diversity work rather than serving as guidelines for mandated processes to achieve equity outcomes. Chapter 5 examines the silence around racism, how this silence impacts on practitioners, and the way that the language of diversity may sustain the privilege of whiteness. In conclusion, she argues that diversity discourse and practice must be located in anti-racist and feminist critique in order to ensure that racism is not rendered invisible by the institution.

My response to the book is a personal one. In the various universities where I have taught, I have played a multitude of roles that would be seen as fitting within the mandate of advancing equity initiatives for underrepresented and under-served students with a specific focus on Māori and Pasifika students. It is important to note that in the New Zealand context the language of diversity has not had the same traction that it has in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, though I think it fair to say that at the senior management level it would have been welcomed. The New Zealand context, specifically the existence of the Treaty of Waitangi (signed in 1840 and securing a compact between the British and Māori to found a nation and build a government) and the political acknowledgment of the special relationship or partnership that exists between Māori and the Crown, disrupts the meaningfulness of the language of diversity. Under the Education Act (1989) and other legislation, duties are imposed on higher education institutions to

provide important recognition of Māori needs and aspirations. All New Zealand universities have statements that speak to special responsibilities and obligations to Māori flowing from the Treaty of Waitangi which must be taken into account in setting strategic goals. The (contested) bi-cultural basis of New Zealand society and Māori engagement in academic life frame much of the equity discourse within the university sector. We still speak equity and equality while valuing the possibilities of diversity but settler states have a colonial past that they must constantly confront and the absence of this in Ahmed's discussion on Australian institutions (limited to a footnote) for me is striking.

The equity work I have engaged in has always been political work. This political work is at times overt and at other times couched in a discourse that strives to be inclusive and comforting for those who may feel that their privilege (including race privilege) is threatened. As Ahmed notes, the need to gain buy-in from many parts of the university means that equity/diversity is nuanced to reach plural audiences. This creates tensions at both the personal and collective level. My nuanced practice has meant that I have come to be seen as 'approachable' and in some cases have been directly compared with other Māori staff members who are depicted as 'inaccessible' and even 'intimidating'. There is a presumption that my affiliation is to the centre rather than to the margins. I recognise that the expectation is that I will be flattered by the perception that I am a reasonable voice. The non-reflective qualities of such comments highlight the way that racism can be uttered in everyday encounters where it works to separate individuals from their own communities of interest. These types of remarks are the kind of 'unwitting' comments discussed in Ahmed's book. They create personal conflict in the person they are directed at as they either render you complicit for not challenging them or may lead to what is seen as a disproportionate response to a harmless comment. It is such fraught occasions that make me wonder what being 'in' institutions means. In a settler society the constant question of who has the authority to host and to welcome is further problematised in light of which individuals are included or excluded. Yet, as Ahmed notes in her discussion, unwitting racism 'often bypasses individual consciousness and intentionality'. (46)

Ahmed's disclosure that the most defensive reactions to charges of institutional racism she has experienced have come from 'critical' white academics

mirrors my own experience. Increasingly, I have become aware the resistance to 'race talk' or 'equity talk' is because many academics see engagement with these issues solely as opportunities to teach rather than to learn. Coming from a place of authority and comfort in their power/knowledge position within the institution, for these academics everything becomes a teaching moment and never a learning moment. This can culminate in what I would call wilful or legitimate ignorance. While these career critics would be loath to admit being ignorant of nearly anything else, there is no perceived loss of cultural capital in not knowing how cultural or identity degradation occurs within a university setting. The whiteness of the institution is constantly reinforced by privileging certain ways of knowing over others. In recognising myself in this book and my professional and personal frailties, I also recognise some of my colleagues. If we are to advance social justice outcomes for staff and students there is a need for greater determination to create pathways to understanding each others' knowledge bases. This necessitates listening and learning, and examining where privilege, prejudice and burden lie, so that we can better imagine the institution into which we wish to welcome ourselves and others.

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